

# I Harvey, Half-Devoured

The great gray beast February had eaten Harvey Swick alive. Here he was, buried in the belly of that smothering month, wondering if he would ever find his way out through the cold coils that lay between here and Easter. He didn't think much of his chances. More than likely he'd become so bored as the hours crawled by that one day he'd simply forget to breathe. Then maybe people would get to wondering why such a fine young lad had perished in his prime. It would become a celebrated mystery, which wouldn't be solved until some great detective decided to re-create a day in Harvey's life.

Then, and only then, would the grim truth be discovered. The detective would first follow Harvey's route to school every morning, trekking through the dismal streets. Then he'd sit at Harvey's desk, and listen to the pitiful drone of the history teacher and the science teacher, and wonder how the heroic boy had managed to keep his eyes open. And finally, as the wasted day dwindled to dusk, he'd trace the homeward trek, and as he set foot on the step from which he had departed that morning, and people asked him-as they would-why such a sweet soul as Harvey had died, he would shake his head and say: "It's very simple."

"Oh?" the curious crowd would say. "Do tell."

And, brushing away a tear, the detective would reply: "Harvey Swick was eaten by the great gray beast February."

It was a monstrous month, that was for sure; a dire and dreary month. The pleasures of Christmas, both sharp and sweet, were already dimming in Harvey's memory, and the promise of summer was so remote as to be mythical. There'd be a spring break, of course, but how far off was that? Five weeks? Six? Mathematics wasn't his strong point, so he didn't irritate himself further by attempting-and failing-to calculate the days. He simply knew that long before the sun came to save him he would have withered away in the belly of the beast.

"You shouldn't waste your time sitting up here," his mom said when she came in and found him watching the raindrops chase each other down the glass of his bedroom window.

"I've got nothing better to do," Harvey said, without looking around.

"Well then, you can make yourself useful," his mom said.

Harvey shuddered. Useful? That was another word for hard labor. He sprang up, marshaling his excuses-he hadn't done this; he hadn't done that-but it was too late.

"You can start by tidying up this room" his mom said.

"But "

"Don't sit wishing the days away, honey. Life's too short."

"But-"

"That's a good boy."

And with that she left him to it. Muttering to himself, he stared around the room. It wasn't even untidy. There were one or two games scattered around; a couple of drawers open; a few clothes hanging out: It looked just fine.

"I am ten," he said to himself (having no brothers and sisters, he talked to himself a good deal). "I mean, it's not like I'm a kid. I don't have to tidy up just because she says so. It's boring."

He wasn't just muttering now, he was talking out loud.

"I want to...I want to..." He went to the mirror, and quizzed it. "What do I want?" The straw-haired, snub-nosed, brown-eyed boy he saw before him shook his head. "I don't know what I want," he said. "I just know I'll die if I don't have some fun. I will! I'll die!"

As he spoke, the window rattled. A gust of wind blew hard against it-then a second; then a third-and even though Harvey didn't remember the window being so much as an inch ajar, it was suddenly thrown open. Cold rain spattered his face. Half-closing his eyes, he crossed to the window and fumbled to slam it, making sure that the latch was in place this time.

The wind had started his lamp moving, and when he turned back the whole room seemed to be swinging around. One moment the light was blazing in his eyes, the next it was flooding the opposite wall. But in between the blaze and the

flood it lit the middle of his room, and standing there-shaking the rain off his hat-was a stranger.

He looked harmless enough. He was no more than six inches taller than Harvey, his frame scrawny, his skin distinctly yellowish in color. He was wearing a fancy suit, a pair of spectacles and a lavish smile.

"Who are you?" Harvey demanded, wondering how he could get past this interloper to the door.

"Don't be nervous," the man replied, teasing off one of his suede gloves, taking Harvey's hand and shaking it. "My name's Rictus. You are Harvey Swick, aren't you?"

" Yes..."

"I thought for a moment I'd got the wrong house"

Harvey couldn't take his eyes off Rictus's grin. It was wide enough to shame a shark, with two perfect rows of gleaming teeth.

Rictus took off his spectacles, pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his waterlogged jacket, then started to mop off the raindrops. Either he or the handkerchief gave off an odor that was far from fragrant. The smell, in truth, was flatulent.

"You've got questions, I can see that," Rictus said to Harvey.

"Yeah."

"Ask away. I've got nothing to hide."

"Well, how did you get in, for one thing?"

"Through the window, of course."

"It's a long way up from the street"

"Not if you're flying."

"Flying?"

"Of course. How else was I going to get around on a foul night like this?

It was either that or a rowboat. We short folk gotta watch out when it's raining this hard. One wrong step and you're swimming." He peered at Harvey quizzically.

"Do you swim?"

"In the summer, sometimes," Harvey replied, wanting to get back to the business of flying.

But Rictus took the conversation in another direction entirely. "On nights like this," he said, "doesn't it seem like there'll never be another summer?"

"It sure does" said Harvey.

"You know I heard you sighing a mile off, and I said to myself `There's a kid who needs a vacation.'" He consulted his watch. "If you've got the time, that is."

"The time?"

"For a trip, boy, for a trip! You need an adventure, young Swick.

Somewhere...out of this world."

"How'd you hear me sighing when you were a mile away?" Harvey wanted to know.

"Why should you care? I heard you. That's all that matters."

"Is it magic of some kind?"

"Maybe."

"Why won't you tell me?"

Rictus gave Harvey a beady stare. "I think you're too inquisitive for your own good, that's why," he said, his smile decaying a little. "If you don't want help, that's fine by me."

He made a move toward the window. The wind was still gusting against the glass, as though eager to come back in and carry its passenger away.

"Wait," Harvey said.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry. I won't ask any more questions."

Rictus halted, his hand on the latch. "No more questions, eh?"

"I promise," said Harvey. "I told you: I'm sorry."

"So you did. So you did." Rictus peered out at the rain. "I know a place where the days are always sunny," he said, "and the nights are full of wonders."

"Could you take me there?"

"We said no questions, boy. We agreed."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Being a forgiving sort, I'll forget you spoke, and I'll tell you this: If you want me to inquire on your behalf, I'll see if they've got room for another guest."

"I'd like that."

"I'm not guaranteeing anything," Rictus said, opening the latch.

"I understand."

The wind gusted suddenly, and blew the window wide. The light began to swing wildly.

"Watch for me," Rictus yelled above the din of rain and wind.

Harvey started to ask him if he'd be coming back soon, but stopped himself in the nick of time.

"No questions, boy!" Rictus said, and as he spoke the wind seemed to fill up his coat. It rose around him like a black balloon, and he was suddenly swept out over the windowsill.

"Questions Trot the mind!" he hollered as he went. "Keep your mouth shut and we'll see what comes your way!"

And with that the wind carried him off, the balloon of his coat rising like a black moon against the rainy sky.

## II

### The Hidden Way

Harvey said nothing about his peculiar visitor to either his mom or his dad, in case they put locks on the windows to stop Rictus returning to the house. But the trouble with keeping the visit a secret was that after a few days Harvey began to wonder if he'd imagined the whole thing. Perhaps he'd fallen asleep at the window, he thought, and Rictus had simply been a dream. He kept hoping nevertheless. "Watch for me," Rictus had said, and Harvey did just that. He watched from the window of his room. He watched from his desk at school. He even watched with one eye when he was lying on his pillow at night. But Rictus didn't show.

And then, about a week after that first visit, just as Harvey's hope was waning, his watchfulness was rewarded. On his way to school one foggy morning he heard a voice above his head, and looked up to see Rictus floating down from the clouds, his coat swelled up around him so that he looked fatter than a prize pig.

"Howya doin'?" he said, as he descended.

"I was starting to think I'd invented you," Harvey replied. "You know, like a dream."

"I get that a lot," Rictus said, his smile wider than ever. "Particularly from the ladies. You're a dream come true, they say" He winked. "And who am I to argue? You like my shoes?"

Harvey looked down at Rictus's bright blue shoes. They were quite a sight, and he said so.

"I got given 'em by my boss," Rictus said. "He's very happy you're going to come visit. So, are you ready?"

"Well..."

"It's no use wasting time," Rictus said. "There may not be room for you tomorrow."

"Can I just ask one question?"

"I thought we agreed-"

"I know. But just one."

"All right. One."

"Is this place far from here?"

"Nah. It's just across town."

"So I'd only be missing a couple of hours of school?"

"That's two questions," Rictus said.

"No, I'm just thinking out loud."

Rictus grunted. "Look," he said, "I'm not here to do a great song and

dance persuading you. I got a friend called Jive does that. I'm just a smiler. I smile, and I say: Come with me to the Holiday House, and if folks don't want to come-" He shrugged. "Hey, it's their hard luck."

With that, he turned his back on Harvey.

"Wait!" Harvey protested. "I want to come. But just for a little while."

"You can stay as long as you like," Rictus said. "Or as little. All I want to do is take that glum expression off your face and put one of these up there."

His grin grew even larger. "Is there any crime in that?"

"No," said Harvey. "That's no crime. I'm glad you found me. I really am."

So what if he missed all of the morning at school, he thought, it'd be no great loss. Maybe an hour or two of the afternoon as well. As long as he was back home by three. Or four. Certainly before dark.

"I'm ready to go," he said to Rictus. "Lead the way."

Millsap, the town in which Harvey had lived all his life, wasn't very big, and he thought he'd seen just about all of it over the years. But the streets he knew were soon behind them, and though Rictus was setting a fair speed Harvey made sure he kept a mental list of landmarks along the way, in case he had to find his way home on his own. A butcher's shop with two pigs' heads hanging from hooks; a church with a yard full of old tombs beside it; the statue of some dead general, covered from hat to stirrups in pigeon dung: All these sights and more he noted and filed away.

And while they walked, Rictus kept up a stream of idle chatter.

"I hate the fog! Just hate it!" he said. "And there'll be rain by noon.

We'll be out of it, of course..." He went on from talk of rain to the state of the streets. "Look at this trash, all over the sidewalk! It's shameful! And the mud! It's making a fine old mess of my shoes!"

He had plenty more to say, but none of it was very enlightening, so after a while Harvey gave up listening. How far was this Holiday House, he began to wonder. The fog was chilling him, and his legs were aching. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn back.

"I know what you're thinking," said Rictus.

"I bet you don't."

"You're thinking this is all a trick. You're thinking Rictus is leading you on a mystery tour and there's nothing at the end of it. Isn't that true?"

"Maybe a little."

"Well, my boy, I've got news for you. Look up ahead."

He pointed, and there-not very far from where they stood-was a high wall, which was so long that it disappeared into the fog to right and left.

"What do you see?" Rictus asked him.

"A wall," Harvey replied, though the more he stared at it the less certain of this he was. The stones, which had seemed solid enough at first sight, now looked to be shifting and wavering, as though they'd been chiseled from the fog itself, and piled up here to keep out prying eyes.

"It looks like a wall," Harvey said, "but it's not a wall."

"You're very observant," Rictus replied admiringly. "Most people just see a dead end, so they turn around and take another street."

"But not us."

"No, not us. We're going to keep on walking. You know why?"

"Because the Holiday House is on the other side?"

"What a mir-ac-u-lous kid you are!" Rictus replied. "That's exactly right. Are you hungry, by the way?"

"Starving."

"Well, there's a woman waiting for you in the House called Mrs. Griffin, and let me tell you, she is the greatest cook in all of Americaland. I swear, on my tailor's grave. Anything you can dream of eating, she can cook. All you have to do is ask. Her deviled eggs" He smacked his lips. "Perfection."

"I don't see a gate," Harvey said.

"That's because there isn't one."

"So how do we get in?"

"Just keep walking!"

Half out of hunger, half out of curiosity, Harvey did as Rictus had instructed, and as he came within three steps of the wall a gust of balmy,

flower-scented wind slipped between the shimmering stones and kissed his cheek. Its warmth was welcome after his long, cold trek, and he picked up his pace, reaching out to touch the wall as he approached it. The misty stones seemed to reach for him in their turn, wrapping their soft, gray arms around his shoulders, and ushering him through the wall.

He looked back, but the street he'd stepped out of, with its gray sidewalks and gray clouds, had already disappeared. Beneath his feet the grass was high and full of flowers. Above his head, the sky was midsummer blue. And ahead of him, set at the summit of a great slope, was a house that had surely been first imagined in a dream.

He didn't wait to see if Ricer was coming after him, nor to wonder how the gray beast February had been slain and this warm day risen in its place. He simply let out a laugh that Rictus would have been proud of, and hurried up the slope and into the shadow of the dream house.

### III

#### Pleasure and the Worm

What a fine thing it would be, Harvey thought, to build a place like this. To drive its foundations deep into the earth; to lay its floors and hoist its walls; to say: Where there was nothing, I raised a house. That would be a very fine thing.

It wasn't a puffed-up peacock of a place, either. There were no marble steps, no fluted columns. It was a proud house, certainly, but there was nothing wrong with that; it had much to be proud of. It stood four stories high, and boasted more windows than Harvey could readily count. Its porch was wide, as were the steps that led up to its carved front door; its slated roofs were steep and crowned with magnificent chimneys and lightning rods.

Its highest point, however, was neither a chimney nor a lightning rod, but a large and elaborately wrought weathervane, which Harvey was peering up at when he heard the front door open and a voice say:

"Harvey Swick, as I live and breathe."

He looked down, the weathervane's white silhouette still behind his eyes, and there on the porch stood a woman who made his grandmother (the oldest person he knew) look young. She had a face like a rolled-up ball of cobwebs, from which her hair, which could also have been spiders' work, fell in wispy abundance. Her eyes were tiny, her mouth tight, her hands gnarled. Her voice, however, was melodious, and its words welcoming.

"I thought maybe you'd decided not to come," she said, picking up a basket of freshly cut flowers she'd left on the step, "which would have been a pity. Come on in! There's food on the table. You must be famished."

"I can't stay long," Harvey said.

"You must do whatever you wish," came the reply. "I'm Mrs. Griffin, by the way."

"Yes, Rictus mentioned you."

"I hope he didn't bend your ear too much. He loves the sound of his own voice. That and his reflection."

Harvey had climbed the porch steps by now, and stopped in front of the open door. This was a moment of decision, he knew, though he wasn't quite certain why.

"Step inside," Mrs. Griffin said, brushing a spider-hair back from her furrowed brow.

But Harvey still hesitated, and he might have turned around and never stepped inside the House except that he heard a boy's voice yelling:

"I got ya! I got ya!" followed by uproarious laughter.

"Wendell!" Mrs. Griffin said. "Are you chasing the cats again?"

The sound of laughter grew even louder, and it was so full of good humor that Harvey stepped over the threshold and into the House just so that he could see the face of its owner.

He only got a brief look. A goofy, bespectacled face appeared for a moment

at the other end of the hallway. Then a piebald cat dashed between the boy's legs and he was off after it, yelling and laughing again.

"He's such a crazy boy," Mrs. Griffin said, "but all the cats love him!"

The House was more wonderful inside than out. Even on the short journey to the kitchen Harvey glimpsed enough to know that this was a place built for games, chases and adventures. It was a maze in which no two doors were alike. It was a treasurehouse where some notorious pirate had hidden his blood-stained booty. It was a resting place for carpets flown by djinns, and boxes sealed before the Flood, where the eggs of beasts that the earth had lost were wrapped and waiting for the sun's heat to hatch them.

"It's perfect!" Harvey murmured to himself.

Mrs. Griffin caught his words. "Nothing's perfect," she replied.

"Why not?"

"Because time passes," she went on, staring down at the flowers she'd cut.

"And the beetle and the worm find their way into everything sooner or later."

Hearing this, Harvey wondered what grief it was Mrs. Griffin had known or seen to make her so mournful.

"I'm sorry," she said, covering her melancholy with a tiny smile. "You didn't come here to listen to my dirges. You came to enjoy yourself, didn't you?"

"I guess I did," Harvey said.

"So let me tempt you with some treats."

Harvey sat himself down at the kitchen table, and within sixty seconds Mrs. Griffin had set a dozen plates of food in front of him: hamburgers, hot dogs and fried chicken; mounds of buttered potatoes; apple, cherry and mud pies, ice cream and whipped cream; grapes, tangerines and a plate of fruits he couldn't even name.

He set to eating with gusto, and was devouring his second slice of pie when a freckled girl with long, frizzy blond hair and huge, blue-green eyes ambled in.

"You must be Harvey," she said.

"How did you know?"

"Wendell told me."

"How did he know?"

She shrugged. "He just heard. I'm Lulu, by the way."

"Did you just arrive?"

"No. I've been here for ages. Longer than Wendell. But not as long as Mrs. Griffin. Nobody's been here as long as she has. Isn't that right?"

"Almost," said Mrs. Griffin, a little mysteriously. "Do you want something to eat, sweetie?"

Lulu shook her head. "No thanks. I haven't got much of an appetite at the moment."

She nevertheless sat down opposite Harvey, stuck her thumb in the mud pie, and licked it clean.

"Who invited you here?" she asked.

"A guy called Rictus."

"Oh yeah. The one with the grin?"

"That's him."

"He's got a sister and two brothers," she went on.

"You've met them then?"

"Not all of them," Lulu admitted. "They keep themselves to themselves. But you'll meet one or two of them sooner or later."

"I...don't think I'll be staying," Harvey said. "I mean my mom and dad don't even know I'm here."

"Sure they do," Lulu replied. "They just didn't tell you about it." This confused Harvey, and he said so. "Call your mom and dad," Lulu suggested. "Ask 'em."

"Can I do that?" he wondered.

"Of course you can," Mrs. Griffin replied. "The phone's in the hallway."

Carrying a spoonful of ice cream with him, Harvey went to the phone and dialed. At first there was a whining sound on the line, as though a wind were in the wires. Then, as it cleared, he heard his mom say: "Who is this?"

"Before you start yelling-" he began.

"Oh, honey," his mom cooed. "Did you arrive?"

"Arrive?"

"You are at the Holiday House, I hope."

"Yes, I am. But-"

"Oh, good. I was worried maybe you'd lost your way. Do you like it there?"

"You knew I was coming?" Harvey said, catching Lulu's eye.

I told you, she mouthed.

"Of course we knew," his mom went on. "We invited Mr. Rictus to show you the place. You looked so sad, you poor lamb. We thought you needed a little fun."

"Really?" said Harvey, astonished by this turn of events.

"We just want you to enjoy yourself," his mom went on. "So you stay just as long as you want."

"What about school?" he said.

"You deserve a little time off," came the reply. "Don't you worry about anything. Just have a good time."

"I will, Mom."

"Bye, honey."

"Bye."

Harvey came away from the conversation shaking his head in amazement.

"You were right," he said to Lulu. "They arranged everything."

"So now you don't have to feel guilty," said Lulu. "Well, I guess I'll see you around later, huh?"

And with that she ambled away.

"If you're finished eating," Mrs. Griffin said, "I'll show you to your room."

"I'd like that."

She duly led Harvey up the stairs. At the landing, basking on the sundrenched windowsill, was a cat with fur the color of the cloudless sky.

"That's Blue-Cat," Mrs. Griffin said. "You saw Stew-Cat playing with Wendell. I don't know where Clue-Cat is, but he'll find you. He likes new guests."

"Do you have a lot of people coming here?"

"Only children. Very special children like you and Lulu and Wendell. Mr. Hood won't have just anybody."

"Who's Mr. Hood?"

"The man who built the Holiday House," Mrs. Griffin replied.

"Will I meet him too?"

Mrs. Griffin looked discomfited by the question. "Maybe," she said, her gaze averted. "But he's a very private man."

They were up on the landing by now, and Mrs. Griffin led Harvey past a row of painted portraits to a room at the back of the House. It overlooked an orchard, and the warm air carried the smell of ripe apples into the room.

"You look tired, my sweet," Mrs. Griffin said. "Maybe you should lie down for a little while"

Harvey usually hated to sleep in the afternoon; it reminded him too much of having the flu, or the measles. But the pillow looked very cool and comfortable, and when Mrs. Griffin had taken her leave he decided to lie down, just for a few minutes.

Either he was more tired than he'd thought, or the calm and comfort of the House rocked him into a slumber. Whichever, his eyes closed almost as soon as he put his head on the pillow, and they did not open again until morning.

## IV

### A Death Between Seasons

The sun came to wake him soon after dawn—a straight white dart of light, laid on his lids. He sat up with a start, wondering for a moment what bed this was, what room, what house. Then his memories of the previous day returned, and he realized that he'd slept through from late afternoon to early morning. The rest had strengthened him. He felt energetic, and with a whoop of pleasure he jumped out of bed and got dressed.

The House was more welcoming than ever today, the flowers Mrs. Griffin had set on every table and sill singing with color. The front door stood open, and sliding down the gleaming banisters Harvey raced out onto the porch to inspect the morning.

A surprise awaited him. The trees which had been heavy with leaves the previous afternoon had shed their canopies. There were new, tiny buds on every branch and twig, as though this were the first day of spring.

"Another day, another dollar," said Wendell, ambling around the corner of the House.

"What does that mean?" said Harvey.

"It's what my father used to say all the time. Another day, another dollar. He's a banker, my dad, Wendell Hamilton the Second. And me, I'm—"

"Wendell Hamilton the Third."

"How'd ya know?"

"Lucky guess. I'm Harvey."

"Yeah, I know. D'ya like tree houses?"

"I never had one"

Wendell pointed up at the tallest tree. There was a platform perched up among the branches, with a rudimentary house built upon it.

"I've been working up there for weeks," said Wendell, "but I can't get it finished alone. Ya want to help me?"

"Sure. But I've got to eat something first."

"Go eat. I'll be around."

Harvey headed back inside, and found Mrs. Griffin setting out a breakfast fit for a prince; There was milk spilt on the floor, and a cat with a tail hooked like a question mark lapping it up.

"Clue-Cat?" he said.

"Yes indeed," Mrs. Griffin said fondly. "He's the wicked one."

Clue-Cat looked up, as if he knew he was being talked about. Then he jumped up onto the table and searched among the plates of pancakes and waffles for something more to eat.

"Can he do whatever he likes?" Harvey said, watching the cat sniff at this and that. "I mean, does nobody control him?"

"Ah, well, we all have somebody watching over us, don't we?" Mrs. Griffin replied. "Whether we like it or not. Now eat. You've got some wonderful times, ahead of you."

Harvey didn't need a second invitation. He dug into his second meal at the Holiday House with even more appetite than he had the first, and then headed out to meet the day.

Oh, what a day it was!

The breeze was warm, and smelled of the green scent of growing things; the perfect sky was full of swooping birds. He sauntered through the grass, his hands in his pockets, like the lord of all he surveyed, calling to Wendell as he approached the trees.

"Can I come up?"

"If you've got a head for heights," Wendell dared him.

The ladder creaked as he climbed, but he made the platform without missing a step. Wendell was impressed.

"Not bad for a new boy," he said. "We had two kids here couldn't even get halfway up."

"Where'd they go?"

"Back home, I s'pose. Kids come and go, you know?"



Harvey peered out through the branches, upon which every bud was bursting.

"You can't see much, can you?" he said. "I mean, there's no sign of the town at all."

"Who cares?" said Wendell. "It's just gray out there anyway."

"And it's sunny here," Harvey said, staring down at the wall of misty stones that divided the grounds of the House from the outside world. "How's that possible?"

Wendell's answer was the same again: "Who cares?" he said. "I know I don't. Now, are we going to start building, or what?"

They spent the next two hours working on the tree house, descending a dozen times to dig through the timbers heaped beside the orchard, looking for boards to finish their repairs. By noon they'd not only found enough wood to fix the roof, but they had each found a friend. Harvey liked Wendell's bad jokes, and that who cares? which found its way into every other sentence. And Wendell seemed just as happy to have Harvey's company.

"You're the first kid who's been real fun," he said.

"What about Lulu?"

"What about her?"

"Isn't she any fun?"

"She was okay when I first arrived," Wendell admitted. "I mean, she's been here months, so she kinda showed me the place. But she's gotten weird the last few days. I see her sometimes wanderin' around like she's sleepwalkin', with a blank expression on her face."

"She's probably going crazy," Harvey said. "Her brain's turning to mush."

"Do you know about that stuff?" Wendell wanted to know, his face lighting up with ghoulisn delight.

"Sure I do" Harvey lied. "My dad's a surgeon."

Wendell was most impressed by this, and for the next few minutes listened in gaping envy as Harvey told him about all the operations he'd seen: skulls sawn open and legs sawn off; feet sewn on where hands used to be, and a man with a boil on his behind that grew into a talking head.

"You swear?" said Wendell.

"I swear," said Harvey.

"That's so cool."

All this talk brought on a fierce hunger, and at Wendell's suggestion they climbed down the ladder and wandered into the House to eat.

"What do you want to do this afternoon?" he asked Harvey as they sat down at the table. "It's going to be real hot. It always is."

"Is there anywhere we can swim?"

Wendell frowned. "Well, yes..." he said doubtfully. "There's a lake around the other side of the House, but you won't much like it."

"Why not?"

"The water's so deep you can't even see the bottom."

"Are there any fish?"

"Oh sure."

"Maybe we could catch some. Mrs. Griffin could cook'em for us."

At this, Mrs. Griffin, who was at the stove piling up a plate with onion rings, gave a little shout, and dropped the plate. She turned to Harvey, her face ashen.

"You don't want to do that," she said.

"Why not?" Harvey replied. "I thought I could do whatever I wanted."

"Well, yes, of course you can," she told him. "But I wouldn't want you to get sick. The fish are...poisonous, you see."

"Oh," said Harvey, "well, maybe we won't eat'em after all."

"Look at this mess," Mrs. Griffin said, fussing to cover her confusion. "I need a new apron."

She hurried away to fetch one, leaving Harvey and Wendell to exchange puzzled looks.

"Now I really have to see those fish," Harvey said.

As he spoke, the ever inquisitive Clue-Cat jumped up onto the counter beside the stove, and before either of the boys could move to stop him he had his paws up on the lip of one of the pans.

"Hey, get down!" Harvey told him.

The cat didn't care to take orders. He hoisted himself up onto the rim of the pan to sniff at its contents, his tail flicking back and forth. The next moment, disaster. The tail danced too close to one of the burners and burst into flames. Clue-Cat yowled, and tipped over the pan he was perched upon. A wave of boiling water washed him off the top of the stove, and he fell to the ground in a smoking heap. Whether drowned, scalded or incinerated, the end was the scone: He hit the floor dead.

The din brought Mrs. Griffin hurrying back.

"I think I'm going to go eat outside," Wendell said as the old woman appeared at the door. He snatched up a couple hot dogs, and was gone.

"Oh my Lord!" Mrs. Griffin cried when she set eyes on the dead cat.

"Oh...you foolish thing."

"It was an accident," Harvey said, sickened by what had happened. "He was up on the stove-"

"Foolish thing. Foolish thing," was all Mrs. Griffin seemed able to say.

She sank down onto her knees, and stared at the sad little sack of burned fur.

"No more questions from you," she finally murmured.

The sight of Mrs. Griffin's unhappiness made Harvey's eyes sting, but he hated to have anyone see him cry, so he fought back his tears as best he could and said: "Shall I help you bury him?" in his gruffest voice.

Mrs. Griffin looked around. "That's very sweet of you," she said so. "But there's no need. You go out and play."

"I don't want to leave you on your own," Harvey said.

"Oh, look at you, child," Mrs. Griffin said. "You've got tears on your cheeks."

Harvey blushed and wiped them away with the back of his hand.

"Don't be ashamed to weep," Mrs. Griffin said. "It's a wonderful thing. I wish I could still shed a tear or two."

"You're sad," Harvey said. "I can see that."

"What I feel is not quite sadness," Mrs. Griffin replied. "And it's not much solace, either, I'm afraid."

"What's solace?" Harvey asked.

"It's something soothing," Mrs. Griffin said, getting to her feet.

"Something that heals the pain in your heart."

"And you don't have any of that?"

"No, I don't," Mrs. Griffin said. She reached out and touched Harvey's cheek. "Except maybe in these tears of yours. They comfort me." She sighed as she traced their tracks with her fingers. "Your tears are sweet, child. And so are you. Now you go out into the light and enjoy yourself. There's sun on the step, and it won't be there forever, believe me."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I'll see you later then," Harvey said, and headed out into the afternoon.

## V

### **The Prisoners**

The temperature had risen while Harvey had been at lunch. A heat-haze hovered over the lawn (which was lusher and more thick with flowers than he remembered) and it made the trees around the House shimmer.

He headed toward them, calling Wendell's name as he went. There was no reply. He glanced back toward the House, thinking he might see Wendell at one of the windows, but they were all reflecting the pristine blue. He looked from House to heavens. There was not a cloud in sight.

And now a suspicion stole upon him, which grew into a certainty as his gaze wandered back to the shimmering copse and the flowers underfoot. During the

hour he'd spent in the cool of the kitchen the season had changed. Summer had come to Mr. Hood's Holiday House; a summer as magical as the spring that had preceded it.

That was why the sky was so faultlessly blue, and the birds making such music. The leaf-laden branches were no less content; nor the blossoms in the grass, nor the bees that buzzed from bloom to bloom, gathering the season's bounty. All were in bliss.

It would not be a long season, Harvey guessed. If the spring had been over in a morning, then most likely this perfect summer would not outlast the afternoon.

I'd better make the most of it, he thought, and hurried in search of Wendell. He finally discovered his friend sitting in the shade of the trees, with a pile of comics at his side.

"Wanna sit down and read?" he asked.

"Maybe later," said Harvey. "First I want to go look at this lake you were talking about. Are you going to come?"

"What for? I told you it's no fun."

"All right, I'll go on my own."

"You won't stay long," Wendell remarked, and went back to his reading.

Though Harvey had a good idea of the lake's general whereabouts, the bushes on that side of the House were thick and thorny, and it took him several minutes to find a way through them. By the time he caught sight of the lake itself the sweat on his face and back was clammy, and his arms had been scratched and bloodied by barbs.

As Wendell had predicted, the lake wasn't worth the trouble. It was largeso large that the far side was barely visible-but gloomy and dreary both the lake and the dark stones around it covered with a film of green scum. There was a legion of flies buzzing around in search of something rotten to feed on, and Harvey guessed they'd have no trouble finding a feast. This was a place where dead things belonged.

He was about to leave when a movement in the shadows caught his eye. Somebody was standing further along the bank, almost eclipsed by the mesh of thicket. He moved a few paces closer to the lake, and saw that it was Lulu. She was perched on the slimy stones at the very edge of the water, gazing into their depths.

Speaking in a near whisper for fear he'd startle her, Harvey said:

"It looks cold."

She glanced up at him, her face full of confusion, and then without a word of reply-turned and bounded away through the bushes.

"Wait!" Harvey called, hurrying toward the lake.

Lulu had already disappeared, however, leaving the thicket shaking. He might have gone in pursuit of her, but the sound of bubbles breaking in the lake took his gaze to the waters, and there, moving just below the coating of scum, he saw the fish. They were almost as large as he was, their gray scales stained and encrusted, their bulbous eyes turned up toward the surface like the eyes of prisoners in a watery pit.

They were watching him, he was certain of that, and their scrutiny made him shudder. Were they hungry, he wondered, and praying to their fishy gods that he'd slip on the stones and tumble in? Or were they wishing he'd come with a rod and a line, so that they could be hauled from the depths and put out of their misery?

What a life, he thought. No sun to warm them; no flowers to sniff at or games to play. Just the deep, dark waters to circle in; and circle, and circle, and circle.

It made him dizzy just watching, and he feared that if he lingered much longer he'd lose his balance and join them. Gasping with relief he turned his back on the sight, and returned into the sunlight as fast as the barbs would allow.

Wendell was still sitting underneath the tree. He had two bottles of icecold soda in the grass beside him, and lobbed one to Harvey as he approached.

"Well?" he said.

"You were right," Harvey replied.

"Nobody in their right minds ever goes there."

"I saw Lulu."

"What did I tell you?" Wendell crowed. "Nobody in their right minds."

"And those fish-"

"-yeah, I know," Wendell said, pulling a face. "Ugly boogers, aren't they?"

"Why would Mr. Hood have fish like that? I mean, everything else is so beautiful. The lawns, the House, the orchard..."

"Who cares?" said Wendell.

"I do," said Harvey. "I want to know everything there is to know about this place."

"Why?"

"So I can tell my mom and dad about it when I go home."

"Home?" said Wendell. "Who needs it? We've got everything we need here."

"I'd still like to know how all this works. Is there some kind of machine making the seasons change?"

Wendell pointed up through the branches at the sun. "Does that look mechanical to you?" he said. "Don't be a dope, Harvey. This is all real. It's magic, but it's real."

"You think so?"

"It's too hot to think," Wendell replied. "Now sit down and shut up." He tossed a few comics in Harvey's direction. "Look through these. Find yourself a monster for tonight."

"What's happening tonight?"

"Halloween, of course," Wendell said. "It happens every night."

Harvey plunked himself down beside Wendell, opened his soda, and began to leaf through the comics, thinking as he leafed and sipped that maybe Wendell was right, and it was too hot to think. However this miraculous place worked, it seemed real enough. The sun was hot, the soda was cold, the sky was blue, the grass was green. What more did he need to know?

Somewhere in the middle of these musings he must have dozed off, because he woke with a start to find that the sun was no longer dappling the ground around him, and Wendell was no longer reading at his side.

He reached for his soda, but the bottle had fallen over, and the scent of sweet cherry had attracted hundreds of ants. They were crawling over it and into it, many drowning for their greed.

As he got to his feet the first real breeze he'd felt since noon blew, and a leaf, its edges sere, spiraled down to land at his feet.

"Autumn..." he murmured to himself.

Until this moment, standing beneath the creaking boughs watching the wind shake down the leaves, autumn had always seemed to him the saddest of seasons. It meant that summer was over, and the nights would be growing long and cold. But now, as the drizzle of leaves became a deluge, and the patter of acorns and chestnuts a drumming, he laughed to see and hear its coming. By the time he was out from under the trees he had leaves in his hair, and down his back, and was kicking them up with every racing step.

As he reached the porch, the first clouds he'd seen all afternoon crept over the sun, and their shadow made the House, which had wavered in the heat of the afternoon like a mirage, suddenly loom, dark and solid.

"You're real," he said, as he stood panting on the porch. "You are, aren't you?"

He started to laugh at the foolishness of talking to a House, but the smile went from his face as a voice, so soft he was barely certain he heard it, said:

"What do you think, child?"

He looked for the speaker, but there was nobody at the threshold, nor out on the porch, nor on the steps behind him.

"Who said that?" he demanded.

There was no answer, which he was glad of. It hadn't been a voice at all, he told himself. It had been a creak of the boards underfoot, or the rustling of dry leaves in the grass. But he stepped into the House with his heart beating a little faster, reminding himself as he went that questions weren't welcome here.

What did it matter, anyway, he thought, whether this was a real place or a dream? It felt real, and that was all that mattered. Satisfied with this, he raced through the House into the kitchen where Mrs. Griffin was weighing the table down with treats.

## VI Seen and Unseen

"Well," said Wendell as they ate, "what are you going to be tonight?"  
"I don't know," Harvey said. "What are you going to be?"  
"A hangman," he said, with a spaghetti grin. "I've been learning how to tie nooses. Now all I've got to do is find someone to hang." He eyed Mrs. Griffin. "It's quick," he said. "You just drop 'em and-snap!-their necks break!"  
"That's horrible!" Mrs. Griffin said. "Why do boys always love talking about ghosts and murders and hangings?"  
"Because it's exciting," Wendell said.  
"You're monsters," she replied, with a hint of a smile. "That's what you are. Monsters."  
"Harvey is," Wendell said. "I've seen him filing down his teeth."  
"Is it a full moon?" Harvey said, smearing ketchup around his mouth and putting on a twitch. "I hope so. I need blood...fresh blood."  
"Good," said Wendell. "You can be a vampire. I'll hang'em and you can suck their blood."  
"Horrible," Mrs. Griffin said again, "just horrible."  
Perhaps the House had heard Harvey wishing for a full moon, because when he and Wendell traipsed upstairs and looked out the landing window, there hanging between the bare branches of the trees-was a moon as wide and as white as a dead man's smile.  
"Look at it!" Harvey said. "I can see every crater. It's perfect."  
"Oh that's just the start," Wendell promised, and led Harvey to a large, musty room which had been filled with clothes of every description. Some were hung on hooks and coat hangers. Some were in baskets, like actors' costumes. Still more were heaped at the far end of the room on the dusty floor. And, halfhidden until Wendell cleared the way, was a sight that made Harvey gasp: a wall covered from floor to ceiling with masks.  
"Where did they all come from?" Harvey said as he gaped at this spectacle.  
"Mr. Hood collects them," Wendell explained. "And the clothes are just stuff that kids who visited here left behind."  
Harvey wasn't interested in the clothes, it was the masks that mesmerized him. They were like snowflakes: no two alike. Some were made of wood and of plastic; some of straw and cloth and papier-mâché. Some were as bright as parrots, others as pale as parchment. Some were so grotesque he was certain they'd been carved by crazy people; others so perfect they looked like the death masks of angels. There were masks of clowns and foxes, masks like skulls decorated with real teeth, and one with carved flames instead of hair.  
"Take your pick" said Wendell. "There's bound to be a vampire somewhere. Whatever I come in here wanting to find, I find it sooner or later."  
Harvey decided to leave the pleasure of choosing a mask until last, and concentrated instead on digging up something suitably batlike to wear. As he worked through the piles of clothes he found himself wondering about the children who'd left them here. Though he'd always hated history lessons, he knew some of the jackets and shoes and shirts and belts had been out of fashion for many, many years. Where were their owners now? Dead, he presumed, or so old it made no difference.  
The thought of these garments belonging to dead folk brought a little shudder to his spine, which was only right. This was Halloween, after all, and what was Halloween without a few chills?  
After a few minutes of searching he found along black coat with a collar

he could turn up, which Wendell pronounced very vampiric. Well satisfied with his choice, he went back to the wall of faces, and his eyes almost immediately alighted upon a mask he hadn't previously seen, with the pallor and deep sockets of a soul just risen from the tomb. He took it down and put it on. It fitted perfectly.

"What do I look like?" Harvey asked, turning to face Wendell, who had found an executioner's mask which fitted him just as well.

"Ugly as sin."

"Good"

There was a flickering family of pumpkin heads lined up on the porch when they stepped outside, and the misty air smelled of wood smoke.

"Where do we go trick-or-treating?" Harvey wanted to know. "Out in the street?"

"No," said Wendell, "it's not Halloween out in the real world, remember? We're going to go around to the back of the House."

"That's not very far," Harvey remarked, disappointed.

"It is at this time of night," Wendell said creepily. "This House is full of surprises. You'll see."

Harvey looked up at the House through the tiny eyeholes of his mask. It loomed as large as a thunderhead, its weathervane sharp enough to stab the stars.

"Come on," said Wendell, "we've got a long trip ahead."

A long trip? Harvey thought; how could it be a long trip from the front of the House to the back? But once again Wendell was right: The House was full of surprises. The trip which would have been a two-minute walk in the bright afternoon-soon became a trek that had Harvey wishing he'd brought a flashlight and a map. The leaves rustled underfoot as though snakes were swarming through them; the trees that had shaded them by day now looked frightful in their nakedness, gaunt and hungry.

"Why am I doing this?" he asked himself as he followed Wendell through the darkness. "I'm cold, and I'm uncomfortable." (He might have added frightened to the list, but he left that thought unsaid.)

As he was about to suggest they turn back, Wendell pointed up and hissed:

"Look!"

Harvey looked. Directly overhead, a form was moving silently against the sky, as if it had just launched itself from the eaves of the House. The moon had slunk away behind the roof, and shed no light upon this night-flyer, so Harvey could only guess at its shape from the stars it blotted out as it sailed. Its wings were wide, but ragged-too ragged to bear it up, he thought. Instead it seemed to claw at the darkness as it went, as though it were crawling on the very air itself.

A glimpse was all Harvey had. Then it was gone.

"What teas that?" he whispered.

He got no answer. In the moments he'd taken staring up at the sky, Wendell had disappeared.

"Wendell? " Harvey whispered. "Where are you?"

There was still no reply. Just the slithering in the leaves, and the moan of hungry branches.

"I know what you're doing," Harvey said, louder this time. "And you won't scare me that easy. Hear me?"

This time there was a reply of sorts. Not words, but a creaking sound from somewhere in the trees.

He's climbing up into the tree house, Harvey thought, and determined to catch Wendell and scare him back, he followed the sound.

Despite the nakedness of the branches, their mesh kept all but a glimmer of starlight from falling on the groves. He slipped his mask down around his neck so as to see a little better, but even then he was nearly blind, and had to listen out for the sound of Wendell's ascent to guide him. He could still hear the creaks plainly enough, and stumbled in their direction, his arms outstretched to grasp the ladder when he reached it.

Now the sound was so loud he was certain he must be standing beneath the tree. He looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the trickster, but as he did so

something brushed his face. He snatched at it, but it was gone, at least for the moment. Then it came again, brushing his brow from the other side. He snatched at it a second time, then, as it touched him again, caught hold of it.

"Got you!" he cried.

His yell of triumph was followed by a rush of air, and the sound of something crashing to the ground at his side. He jumped, but refused to let go of whatever he was holding.

"Wendell?" he called.

By way of a reply a flame flared in the darkness behind him, and a firework erupted into a shower of green sparks, its light making a gangrenous cavern of the grove.

By its flickering light he saw what he held, and seeing, let out a panicked yammering that had the crows rising from their roosts overhead.

It was not a ladder he'd heard creaking, it was a rope. No, not even a rope: a noose. And in his hand, the leg of the man hanging from the noose. He let go of it and stumbled backward, barely suppressing a second shout as his eyes rose to meet the dead man's stare. To judge by his expression, he had died horribly. His tongue lolled from his foamy lips, his veins were so swollen with blood his head looked like a pumpkin.

Either that, or it was a pumpkin.

A fresh fountain of sparks now burst from the firework, and Harvey saw the truth of the matter. The limb he'd held was a stuffed trouser leg; the body a coat spilling bundles of clothes; that head a mask on a pumpkin, with cream for spittle and eggs for eyes.

"Wendell!" he yelled, turning his back on this scene of execution.

Wendell was standing on the far side of the firework, his ear-to-ear grin lit by its spitting sparks. He looked like a little demon, fresh from the inferno. At his side was the ladder that had come crashing down to get the drama underway.

"I warned ya!" Wendell said, holding up his mask. "I said I was going to be a hangman tonight!"

"I'll get you back for his!" Harvey said, his heart still beating too fast for him to see the funny side of this. "I swear...I'll get you back!"

"You can try!" Wendell crowed. The firework was beginning to fizzle out; the shadows around them beginning to deepen again. "Had enough of Halloween for tonight?" he asked.

Harvey didn't much like admitting defeat, but he nodded grimly, swearing to himself that when he finally got his revenge, it would be choice.

"Smile," Wendell said, as the fountain of sparks dwindled. "We're in the Holiday House."

The light had almost gone, and even though Harvey was still enraged at Wendell (and at himself, for being such a sucker), he couldn't let it die away without making peace.

"All right," he said, allowing himself a tiny smile. "There'll be other nights."

"Always," said Wendell. The reply pleased him. "That's what this place is," he said, as the light went out. "It's the House of Always."

## VII

### A Present From the Past

There was a Thanksgiving feast awaiting them when they got back into the House.

"You look as though you've been in the wars," Mrs. Griffin remarked when she set eyes on Harvey. "Has Wendell been up to his tricks?"

Harvey admitted that he'd fallen for all of them, but there was one that impressed him in particular.

"What was that?" said Wendell with a smug grin. "The falling ladder? That was a clever little touch, wasn't it?"

"No, not the ladder," said Harvey.

"What then?"

"The thing in the sky."

"Oh that..."

"What was it? A kite?"

"That wasn't my doing," Wendell replied.

"What was it then?"

"I don't know," Wendell said, his smile disappearing. "Better not to ask, eh?"

"But I want to know," Harvey insisted, turning to Mrs. Griffin. "It had wings, and I think it flew off the roof."

"Then it was a bat," Mrs. Griffin said.

"No, this was a hundred times bigger than a bat." He spread his arms.

"Great, dark wings."

Mrs. Griffin frowned as Harvey spoke. "You imagined it," she said.

"I did not," Harvey protested.

"Why don't you just sit down and eat?" Mrs. Griffin replied. "If it wasn't a bat then it wasn't anything at all."

"But Wendell saw it too. Didn't you Wendell?"

He looked around at the other boy, who was digging into a steaming plate of turkey and cranberry sauce.

"Who cares?" Wendell said, chewing as he spoke.

"Just tell her you saw it."

Wendell shrugged. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. It's Halloween night.

There's supposed to be bogeymen out there."

"But not real ones," said Harvey. "A trick's one thing. But if that beast was real..."

As he spoke he realized he was breaking the rule he'd made on the porch: Whether the winged creature was real or not didn't matter. This was a place of illusions. Wouldn't he be happier here if he just stopped questioning what was real and what wasn't?

"Sit down and eat," Mrs. Griffin said again.

Harvey shook his head. His appetite had disappeared. He was angry, though he wasn't quite sure at whom. Maybe at Wendell, for his shrugs; or at Mrs. Griffin, for not believing him; or at himself, for being afraid of illusions. Maybe all three.

"I'm going up to my room to change," he said, and left the kitchen.

He discovered Lulu on the landing, staring out the window. Wind gusted against the glass, reminding Harvey of Rictus's first visit. It wasn't rain the gusts were bringing, however, it was powdery snow.

"It'll be Christmas soon," she said.

"Will it?"

"There'll be presents for everyone. There always are. You should wish for something."

"Is that what you're doing?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I've been here so long I've got everything I ever wanted. Would you like to see?"

Harvey said yes, and she led him up the stairs to her room, which was immense, and filled with her treasures.

She obviously had a passion for boxes. Tiny, jeweled boxes; large, carved boxes. A box for her collection of glass balls; a box that played tinkling music; a box into which half a hundred smaller boxes fitted.

She also had several families of dolls, who sat in blank-faced rows around the walls. But more impressive by far was the house from which the dolls had been exiled. It stood in the middle of the room, five feet high from step to chimney top, every detail of brick, slate and sill perfect.

"This is where I keep my friends," Lulu said, and opened the front door. Two bright green lizards came out to greet her, scurrying up her arms onto her shoulders.

"The rest are inside," she said. "Take a look."

Harvey peered through the windows, and found that every perfect room in the house was occupied. There were lizards lounging on the beds, lizards



snoozing in the baths, lizards swinging from the chandeliers. He laughed out loud at their antics.

"Aren't they fun?" Lulu said.

"Great!" he replied.

"You can come up and play with them any time you want."

"Thanks."

"They're really very friendly. They only bite when they're hungry. Here--"

She plucked one off her shoulder and dropped it into Harvey's hands. It

promptly ran up and perched on his head, much to Lulu's amusement.

They enjoyed the company of both the lizards and each other for a long while, until Harvey caught a glimpse of his reflection in one of the windows, and remembered what a sight he was.

"I'd better go and wash," he told Lulu. "I'll see you later."

She smiled at him. "I like you, Harvey Swick," she said.

Hey honesty made him honest. "I like you too," he told her. Then, his expression darkening, he said: "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." She looked puzzled.

"I saw you at the lake," he said.

"Did you?" she replied. "I don't remember."

"Well anyway, it's deep. You should be careful. You could slip and fall in."

"I'll be careful," she said as he opened the door. "Oh, and Harvey?"

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to wish for something."

What shall I ask for? he wondered as he washed the dirt off his face. Something impossible maybe, to see just how much magic the House possessed. A white tiger, perhaps. A full-sized zeppelin? A ticket to the moon?

The answer came from the depths of his memory. He'd wish for a present he'd been given (and lost) a long time ago; a present that his father had made for him, which Mr. Hood, however much he might want to please his new guest, would never be able to duplicate.

"The ark," he murmured.

With his face washed, and the scratches he'd got from the thorns in the thicket worn like war wounds, he headed back downstairs, to find that once again the House had performed an extraordinary transformation. A Christmas tree--so tall that the star at its summit pricked the ceiling--stood in the hallway, the colors of its twinkling lights seeping into every room. There was a smell of chocolate in the air, and the sound of carols being sung. In the living room, Mrs. Griffin was sitting beside a roaring fire, with Stew-Cat purring on her lap.

"Wendell's gone outside," she told Harvey. "There's a scarf and gloves for you by the front door."

Harvey went out onto the porch. The wind was icy, but it was already clearing the snow clouds, leaving the stars to shine down on a perfect white carpet.

Not quite perfect. A trail of tracks led down from the House to the spot where Wendell was building a snowman.

"Coming out?" he hollered to Harvey, his voice as clear as the bells that were ringing through the crisp air.

Harvey shook his head. He was so tired even the snow looked comfortable.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. "It'll be back tomorrow, won't it?"

"Of course," Wendell yelled. "And the night after, and the night after..."

Harvey went back inside to look at the Christmas tree. Its branches were hung with strings of popcorn and cranberries, with colored lights and baubles and soldiers in gleaming silver uniforms.

"There's something under there for you," Mrs. Griffin said, standing at the living room door. "I hope it's what you want, sweet."

Harvey knelt down and pulled a parcel with his name on it out from under the tree. His pulse quickened before he even opened it, because he knew from its shape, and from the way it rattled, that his wish had been answered. He pulled at the string, remembering as he did so how much littler his hands had been the first time he'd held this gift. The paper tore and fell away, and there, shiny

and new, was a painted wooden ark.

It was a perfect copy of the one his father had made. The same yellow hull, the same orange prow, the same wheel-house with holes in its red roof for the giraffes to put their heads through. The same lead animals, all in pairs, snug in the hold or peering through the portholes: two dogs, two elephants, two camels, two doves; all these and a dozen more. And finally, the same little Noah with his square white beard, and his fat wife, complete with apron.

"How did he know?" Harvey murmured.

He hadn't intended the question to be heard, much less answered, but Mrs.

Griffin. said: "Mr. Hood knows every dream in your head."

"But this is perfect," Harvey said in amazement. "Look, my dad ran out of blue paint when he was finishing the elephants, so one of them has blue eyes and the other one has green eyes. It's the same. It's exactly the same."

"Does it please you then?" Mrs. Griffin asked.

Harvey said it did, but that wasn't entirely the truth. It was eerie to have the ark back in his hands when he knew the real one had been lost; as though time had been turned on its heels, and he was a little kid again. He heard Wendell stamping the snow off his feet at the front door, and was suddenly embarrassed to have such a childish present in his hands. He gathered it up in its wrapping and hurried away upstairs, intending to head back down for some supper.

But his bed looked too welcoming to be refused, and his stomach quite full enough for one night, so instead he closed the curtains on the gusty night and laid his head down on his pillow.

The Christmas bells were still ringing in some distant steeple, and their repetition lulled him into sleep. He dreamed that he was standing on the steps of his house, looking through the open door into its warm heart. Then the wind caught hold of him, turning him from the threshold, and carrying him away into a dreamless sleep.

## VIII

### Hungry Waters

That first day in the Holiday House, with all its seasons and its spectacles, set the pattern for the many that were to follow.

When Harvey woke the following morning, the sun was once again pouring through a crack in the curtains, but this time it lay in a warm pool on the pillow beside him. He sat up with a shout and a smile, and either one or the other (and sometimes both) remained on his lips for the rest of the day.

There was plenty to do. Work on the tree house in the spring morning, followed by food, and the laying of plans for the afternoon. Games and lazy hours in the heat of summer-sometimes with Wendell, sometimes with Lulu-then adventures by the light of a harvest moon. And finally, when the winter wind had blown out the flames in the pumpkin heads, and carpeted the grounds with snow, chilly fun for them all out in the frosty air, and a warm Christmas welcome when they were done.

It was a day of holidays, the third as fine as the second, and the fourth as fine as the third, and very soon Harvey began to forget that there was a dull world out beyond the wall, where the great beast February was still sleeping its tedious sleep.

His only real reminder of the life he'd left-besides a second telephone call he'd made to his mom and dad just to tell them all was well-was the present he'd wished for, and received, that first Christmas: his ark. He'd thought several times of trying it out on the lake, to see if it would float, but it wasn't until the afternoon of the seventh day that he got around to doing so. Wendell had made a real glutton of himself at lunch, and had declared that it was far too hot to play, so Harvey wandered down to the lake on his own, with the ark tucked under his arm. He half expected-hoped, in fact to find Lulu down

there to keep him company, but the banks of the lake were empty. Once he laid eyes on the gloomy waters he almost gave upon the idea of a launching, but that meant admitting something to himself that he didn't wish to admit, so he headed on down to the shore, found a rock to perch on that looked less precarious than the others, and set his ark on the water. It floated well, he was pleased to see. He pushed it to and fro for a little while, then lifted it out and peered inside to see if it was leaking. It was quite watertight, however, so he set it back on the lake and pushed it out again.

As he did so, he caught sight of a fish rising from the bottom of the lake, its mouth wide open, as if it intended to swallow his little vessel whole. He reached out to snatch the ark from the water before it was either sunk or devoured, but in his haste he lost his footing on the slime-slickened rock, and with a cry he fell into the lake.

The water was icy cold, and eager. It quickly closed over his head. He flailed wildly, trying not to imagine the dark depths beneath him, or the vast maw of the fish that had been rising from those depths. Turning his face up toward the surface, he started to swim.

He could see his ark floating above him, capsized by his fall. Its lead passengers were already sinking. He didn't try and save them, but surfaced gasping for breath-and paddled toward the shore. It wasn't much of a distance.

In less than a minute he was hauling himself up onto the rocks and scrambling away from the bank, water pouring from his sleeves and trousers and shoes. Only when his feet were well clear of the lake, and no hungry fish could snap at his toes, did he drop down onto the ground.

Though it was midsummer, and the sun was blazing somewhere overhead, the air around the lake was cold, and he soon began to shiver. Before he made his way out into the sun, however, he looked for some sign of his ark. The spot where it had sunk was marked by a forlorn flotilla of wreckage, all of which would soon join the rest of the ark at the bottom.

Of the fish that had seemed so eager to devour him there was no sign.

Perhaps it had swum down into the depths to chew on the drowned menagerie. If so, Harvey hoped it choked on its dinner.

He'd lost plenty of toys before. He'd had a brand new bicycle-his prize possession!-stolen from the step of his house two birthdays ago. But this loss upset him as much; more, in fact. The idea that the lake now had something that he'd owned was somehow worse than a thief running off with his bike. A thief was warm flesh and blood; the lake was not. His possessions had gone into a nightmare place, full of monstrous things, and he felt as though a little part of himself had gone with it, down into the dark.

He walked away from the lake without looking back, but the breeze that came to warm his face when he broke through the thicket, and the sound of birds that pleased his ear, could not keep from his mind the thought he'd tried to ignore when he'd gone down to the water. Despite all entertainments that the Holiday House supplied so eagerly, it was a haunted place, and however hard he had tried to ignore his doubts and suppress his questions, they could be ignored and suppressed no longer. Whoever, or whatever, that haunter was, Harvey could not be content now until he'd seen its face and knew its nature.